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BREAKING BARRIERS IN ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP: INSTITUTIONAL AND CULTURAL CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN ACADEMICS

AKADEMİK LİDERLİKTE ENGELLERİ AŞMAK: KADIN AKADEMİSYENLER İÇİN KURUMSAL VE KÜLTÜREL ZORLUKLAR

Damla Köroğlu ÜNVER[(1)]

Öz: This study explores the structural and cultural barriers encountered by women academics in Türkiye in their pursuit of leadership positions, focusing on business schools at public universities. Guided by the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Institutionalism and Poststructuralist Feminism, the research employs a qualitative, phenomenological design based on in-depth interviews with twenty women in leadership roles. Thematic analysis revealed four broad themes: invisible barriers shaping gendered career paths, promotion structures reinforcing inequality, exclusion through male-dominated informal networks, and the need to reimagine inclusive leadership models. The findings demonstrate that while formal policies promoting gender equity exist, informal institutional norms and cultural narratives continue to sustain gendered hierarchies. The study offers both theoretical insights and practical recommendations, advocating for structural reforms and cultural transformations to create more inclusive and equitable academic environments. By foregrounding the voices and lived experiences of women leaders, this research contributes to bridging the gap between feminist theory and actionable institutional change.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Academic Leadership, Feminist Institutionalism, Poststructuralist Feminism, Structural Barriers

JEL: J16, I23, M12, Z13

Abstract: *Bu çalışma, Türkiye'de kamu üniversitelerinin işletme fakültelerinde görev yapan kadın akademisyenlerin liderlik pozisyonlarına ulaşma süreçlerinde karşılaştıkları yapısal ve kültürel engelleri incelemektedir. Araştırma, kuramsal çerçevesini Feminist Kuramsalcılık ve Postyapısalcı Feminizm yaklaşımlarından alarak, nitel ve fenomenolojik bir tasarımla yürütülmüştür. Liderlik pozisyonunda bulunan yirmi kadın akademisyenle yapılan derinlemesine görüşmelere dayanan çalışmada, tematik analiz sonucunda dört ana tema belirlenmiştir: toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı kariyer yollarını şekillendiren görünmez engeller, eşitsizliği yeniden üreten terfi yapıları, erkek egemen gayri resmî ağlar aracılığıyla dışlama ve kapsayıcı liderlik modellerinin yeniden tasarlanması ihtiyacı. Araştırma bulguları, toplumsal cinsiyet eşitliğini teşvik eden resmî politikaların varlığına rağmen, kurumsal yapıların içerisindeki gayri resmî normlar ve kültürel anlatıların toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı hiyerarşileri sürdürdüğünü ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma hem kuramsal hem de pratik düzeyde katkılar sunmakta; daha kapsayıcı ve adil akademik ortamların inşası için yapısal reformlar ve kültürel dönüşümler önerilmektedir. Kadın liderlerin seslerini ve deneyimlerini ön plana çıkaran bu araştırma, feminist kuram ile kurumsal düzeyde somut değişim arasındaki boşluğun kapatılmasına katkı sağlamaktadır.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Toplumsal Cinsiyet Eşitliği, Akademik Liderlik, Feminist Kurumsalcılık, Postyapısalcı Feminizm, Yapısal Engeller*

[(1)] İstanbul Üniversitesi, İşletme Fakültesi, Yönetim ve Organizasyon Bölümü; damla.koroglu@istanbul.edu.tr, ORCID: 0000-0001-9749-3152
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1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, significant progress has been made globally in advancing gender equality, particularly within education and professional sectors. Women have increasingly entered historically male-dominated fields, now representing nearly half of the global labor force and attaining unprecedented levels of educational achievement (Fox, 2010; Goulden et al., 2011). However, despite these advancements, substantial gender disparities persist, especially within academia. Women continue to encounter structural and cultural barriers that inhibit their progression to senior leadership roles (Marschke et al., 2007; Monroe and Chiu, 2010; Bird, 2011).

The "leaky pipeline" phenomenon aptly captures this attrition, where women, despite entering academia in significant numbers, are systematically underrepresented at the highest ranks, including full professorships and administrative leadership positions (Wolfinger et al., 2008). Globally, while women earn more than 50% of doctoral degrees, their representation at the professorial and senior management levels remains disproportionately low (Savigny, 2019; Sezgin and Hobikoğlu, 2022). In Türkiye, the patterns mirror these global trends: women constitute approximately 44% of the academic workforce yet occupy a markedly small percentage of high-level leadership roles, such as rectorships and deanships (Yıldız, 2018). This imbalance points to deep-seated institutional structures and cultural norms that continue to marginalize women's leadership potential within academic settings.

Structural and cultural dynamics contribute jointly to sustaining gendered hierarchies in academia. While overt discrimination has declined, implicit biases embedded in promotion and tenure processes persist (Valian, 2005; Baker, 2010). Academic institutions often valorize uninterrupted career trajectories and high-volume research outputs — criteria that disadvantage women balancing professional roles with caregiving responsibilities (Misra et al., 2012; Wolfinger et al., 2009). Furthermore, women frequently undertake more teaching and service responsibilities, which are traditionally undervalued in tenure and promotion evaluations (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2004). Leadership remains associated with traditionally masculine traits such as assertiveness and authority, marginalizing leadership styles that emphasize collaboration and empathy (Benschop and Brouns, 2003).

In Türkiye, gendered institutional structures are further compounded by socio-cultural norms that relegate women to secondary roles both in the family and the public sphere. Although women's participation rates in academia are relatively high compared to many Western countries, their ascent to leadership roles is restricted by patriarchal values, symbolic capital dynamics, and persistent gender biases (Savigny, 2017; Sturm, 2006; Yamak et al., 2016). Traditional gender roles, emphasizing women's familial responsibilities over professional ambitions, heavily influence academic career trajectories, limiting women's access to influential leadership positions and consolidating existing power structures.

These dynamics align with cultural dimensions identified by scholars such as Hofstede and House et al. (GLOBE study), which classify Türkiye as a society with high power distance, collectivism, and moderate gender egalitarianism—features that tend to reinforce hierarchical structures and traditional leadership ideals (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). In such cultural contexts, leadership is often associated with

assertiveness, decisiveness, and authority—traits traditionally linked to masculinity—further entrenching male-dominated norms within academic institutions.

To critically analyze these complex intersections, Poststructuralist Feminism and Feminist Institutionalism offer robust theoretical frameworks. Poststructuralist Feminism interrogates the discursive construction of leadership as inherently masculine, challenging the cultural narratives that associate authority with male traits and marginalize alternative leadership styles grounded in empathy, collaboration, and emotional intelligence (Butler, 1990; Scott, 2007; Weedon, 1987). By deconstructing language and symbolic representations, this approach reveals how gendered expectations subtly but powerfully regulate institutional behaviors and outcomes.

Complementing this lens, Feminist Institutionalism focuses on how formal structures and informal practices within institutions perpetuate gendered inequalities. Joan Acker's seminal concept of "gendered organizations" illustrates how institutions implicitly presume a universal, disembodied worker, thereby marginalizing individuals — particularly women — who carry caregiving burdens (Acker, 1990). Biased tenure systems, exclusionary networking practices, and informal "old boys' clubs" reinforce male dominance within academic hierarchies (Mackay et al., 2010).

In light of these frameworks, this study set out to explore the structural and cultural barriers encountered by women academics in Türkiye in their pursuit of leadership positions, with a specific focus on business schools within public universities. Adopting a qualitative, phenomenological research design, the study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with approximately 20 women who have attained leadership roles, aiming to capture the richness of their lived experiences, perceptions, and strategies for navigating institutional challenges.

The findings organized around four key themes—Invisible Barriers: Gendered Career Paths and Systemic Biases, The Tenure Trap: How Promotion Structures Reinforce Gender Inequality, Locked Out: The Power of Male Networks in Academic Leadership, and Reimagining Leadership: Inclusive Models for Transforming Academia—reveal a complex interplay between formal institutional policies and informal cultural practices that continue to sustain gendered hierarchies. Despite official commitments to meritocracy and gender equity, the participants' narratives illuminated how hidden mechanisms, biased evaluation criteria, and exclusionary leadership norms collectively limit women's career advancement.

The study's findings contribute theoretically by empirically demonstrating how institutional structures and cultural discourses interact to perpetuate gender inequalities, particularly within a non-Western academic context. Practically, the research offers actionable recommendations, advocating for an integrated approach that combines structural reforms—such as transparent promotion policies, formal mentorship programs, and flexible tenure paths—with cultural transformations that redefine leadership, success, and academic excellence in inclusive terms.

Ultimately, this research seeks to bridge theoretical insights with practical reforms, contributing to ongoing efforts to foster sustainable gender equity in academic leadership. By foregrounding women's voices and centering institutional transformation, the study underscores the necessity of addressing both the visible and invisible dimensions of inequality to create academic environments where diverse leadership styles and career trajectories are not only recognized but actively celebrated.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Feminist Institutionalism

Feminist Institutionalism, developed in the 1990s, integrates political science, sociology, and feminist theory to examine how institutions perpetuate gender inequality. Acker's (1992) notion of "gendered institutions" revealed how ostensibly neutral structures often marginalize women by privileging male norms.

Building on March and Olsen's (1983) "new institutionalism," scholars highlight how formal systems (e.g., hiring, promotion) and informal practices (e.g., networking, leadership norms) embed gendered power dynamics (Lowndes, 2014). Path dependency helps explain how historic male dominance continues to shape leadership norms despite formal equality policies (Thelen, 1999). Mackay and Kenny (2009) introduced nested institutions, showing that reforms like gender quotas may be undermined by informal resistance. "Old boys' clubs," for instance, persist even in institutions with equity policies.

This approach stresses the dual role of formal rules and informal norms in sustaining gender bias (Waylen, 2014). Masculine-coded leadership traits—assertiveness, independence—remain privileged over collaborative or empathetic approaches. In Türkiye, where women comprise 44% of academics, they remain underrepresented in senior roles due to patriarchal norms, biased evaluations, and exclusionary informal networks (Yıldız, 2018; Savigny, 2017; Yamak et al., 2016).

Institutional change occurs through mechanisms like displacement, layering, drift, and conversion (Mahoney and Thelen, 2009), but reforms are often weakened by informal practices (Helmke and Levitsky, 2012). The logic of appropriateness reinforces masculine ideals of leadership, marginalizing women's styles (Chappell and Waylen, 2013; Benschop and Brouns, 2003). Structural evaluation systems that reward uninterrupted careers and high-impact publications disadvantage women, especially caregivers (Clavero and Galligan, 2020; Witteman et al., 2019).

Evidence shows that policy change alone is insufficient; without cultural reform, top-down initiatives often fail (Wendoh and Wallace, 2005; Weiner and MacRae, 2014). In Türkiye, genuine reform must address both institutional structures and cultural narratives. Feminist Institutionalism thus provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing and transforming the structural and cultural barriers that restrict women's leadership in academia.

2.2. Poststructuralist Feminism

Poststructuralist Feminism critiques essentialist assumptions in earlier feminist theories. Drawing from Foucault, Derrida, and Deleuze, it argues that identity categories like gender are socially constructed through discourse (Foucault, 1977; Derrida, 1978).

Butler's (1990) concept of gender performativity reveals how repeated behaviors, shaped by norms, create the illusion of fixed identities. In academia, this helps explain how leadership is constructed as masculine, marginalizing alternative styles. Similarly, Scott (2007) argues that discourse sustains institutional hierarchies by embedding masculine ideals into terms like "excellence" and "meritocracy."

Foucault's (1990) power/knowledge concept shows how institutions define legitimate leadership through competitive, assertive behaviors—traits that devalue relational

approaches (Chappell, 2014). Kristeva, Irigaray, and Cixous also critique how language marginalizes women and advocate for alternative expressions (Kristeva, 1980; Irigaray, 1985).

Poststructuralist Feminism rejects monolithic views of womanhood, emphasizing the fragmentation of power and context-bound identities. It reveals subtle exclusion through norms like the double bind, where women are penalized for being too assertive or too emotional (Gains and Lowndes, 2014).

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2013) complements this critique by showing how gender intersects with race, class, and other identities. In Türkiye, women from marginalized backgrounds face compounded leadership barriers (Yamak et al., 2016).

This perspective exposes how academic leadership is framed through narrow, masculinized terms, disguising exclusion under the guise of neutrality (Baxter, 2016). In Turkish academia, hierarchical models dominate, often sidelining inclusive leadership styles (Savigny, 2017). It also addresses symbolic violence, whereby women's leadership is delegitimized not through overt exclusion but via institutional language and expectations (Yamak et al., 2016).

In sum, Poststructuralist Feminism offers tools to deconstruct the cultural foundations of inequality in leadership, challenging binaries and enabling more inclusive, justice-oriented academic structures.

3. Literature Review

3.1. Global Gender Disparities in Academia

Despite progress, women remain underrepresented in senior academic leadership. Though they earn a large share of doctorates and hold many junior positions, they lag in promotions and executive roles globally (Wolfinger et al., 2008; Savigny, 2019). The "leaky pipeline" metaphor captures this attrition, with fewer women at each career stage. While over 50% of doctoral graduates are women, less than 26% become full professors (Savigny, 2019; Monroe and Chiu, 2010).

Several factors contribute. Subtle, cumulative gender biases in recruitment and promotion persist. Feminized labor like teaching and mentorship is undervalued compared to research, especially prestigious publications (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2004; Misra et al., 2012). Caregiving responsibilities further hinder advancement (Wolfinger et al., 2009).

Academic structures favor uninterrupted, linear careers—models aligned with male trajectories (Probert, 2005; Valian, 2005). Promotion criteria reward sustained research output, disadvantaging those with caregiving breaks. Leadership also remains framed around masculine-coded traits—competitiveness, independence—while empathetic or collaborative traits are undervalued (Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Chappell, 2014). Informal networks—"old boys' clubs"—play a decisive role, often excluding women from opportunities (Fox and Colatrella, 2006).

These trends also apply in Türkiye. Although women enter academia at high rates, they face similar barriers to leadership shaped by entrenched institutional and cultural dynamics (Yıldız, 2018; Sezgin and Hobikoğlu, 2022). Thus, global disparities offer critical context for examining gender inequality in Turkish higher education.

3.2. Structural and Cultural Barriers to Women's Advancement in Academic Leadership

Despite formal equality commitments, gender disparities persist due to interwoven structural and cultural barriers. Promotion systems prioritize continuous productivity, seniority, and individual research—criteria that disadvantage women with caregiving roles (Probert, 2005; Misra et al., 2012). Women's work in mentoring or service is undervalued relative to solo research output (Ward and Wolf-Wendel, 2004).

Implicit biases influence evaluations, subjecting women to stricter scrutiny and promoting masculine ideals of leadership (Valian, 2005; Monroe and Chiu, 2010). Informal male-dominated networks further limit access to mentorship and advancement (Fox and Colatrella, 2006).

Culturally, leadership continues to be coded as masculine—traits like independence and authority are idealized (Benschop and Brouns, 2003; Chappell, 2014). Women face a double bind when they diverge from or conform to these norms (Gains and Lowndes, 2014). In Türkiye, cultural expectations of women's caregiving roles penalize those who pursue academic leadership (Wolfinger et al., 2009; Yamak et al., 2016).

While caregiving has long been recognized as a key factor inhibiting women's advancement, it is not the sole embodied or emotional burden women face in academia. Beyond caregiving duties, women academics navigate a spectrum of gendered bodily and psychological challenges that are often overlooked within institutional structures. Biological experiences such as pregnancy, childbirth, and menstruation are rarely accommodated in academic performance metrics or leadership trajectories, despite their tangible impact on productivity and presence. Studies have shown that pregnancy and maternity leave are perceived as interruptions rather than institutional responsibilities, and women returning to work often face heightened pressure to compensate for "lost time" (Özkanlı and White, 2009; White, 2003). Moreover, the emotional and mental burdens disproportionately borne by women—such as stress, burnout, and anxiety—are exacerbated by gendered expectations in academic culture, where emotional labor and relational work are undervalued (Morley, 2013; Luke, 2001). These embodied and affective dimensions of inequality are rarely addressed in leadership development policies, yet they play a decisive role in shaping women's ability to pursue and sustain positions of academic authority. Thus, gendered experiences of the body and mind must be seen not as individual shortcomings but as structurally silenced realities that reinforce male-centric academic norms.

Exclusion is also embedded in institutional language. Leadership traits like "visionary" or "natural leader" align with masculine ideals, sidelining relational approaches (Baxter, 2016). Homosocial reproduction (Kanter, 1977) perpetuates male-dominated leadership by favoring similarity in recruitment and mentoring.

In Türkiye, gender intersects with socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and geography to deepen marginalization (Crenshaw, 2013; Yamak et al., 2016). Even women in leadership face symbolic barriers, including doubts about their legitimacy and constrained authority.

While gender equality units exist in Turkish universities, they often lack authority and resources. Reforms remain symbolic if they do not disrupt entrenched informal norms (Sezgin and Hobikoğlu, 2022).

While extensive research documents gender disparities in academia, much of the literature tends to treat structural and cultural barriers as discrete issues rather than intertwined forces shaping women's academic careers. Furthermore, many studies focus on Western contexts, limiting their applicability to Türkiye's unique institutional and cultural landscape. Existing research on Türkiye highlights persistent challenges yet often lacks integration of both macro-structural factors and micro-cultural dynamics (Sezgin and Hobikoğlu, 2022; Yıldız, 2018). This study responds to these gaps by employing Feminist Institutionalism and Poststructuralist Feminism to critically examine how formal policies and informal norms interact to sustain gender inequalities, providing a nuanced understanding grounded in the specific realities of Turkish higher education.

3.3. The Structure of Turkish Higher Education and Gender Representation

As of 2025, Türkiye's higher education system comprises 207 universities, including 129 public and 78 foundation (private) institutions. These universities employ a total of 185,957 academic staff, encompassing all ranks from research assistants to full professors. According to the Council of Higher Education (YÖK, 2025), women represent 46.8% of the academic workforce, while men account for 53.2%.

Women are particularly well represented in entry-level positions, including research assistants (55.1%) and lecturers (52.2%). However, their representation significantly declines at senior academic levels. Only 35.1% of full professors are women, illustrating a classic manifestation of the "leaky pipeline" phenomenon, whereby women exit or are excluded from academic career advancement at higher ranks.

A comparative analysis by institution type reveals that women comprise 54.8% of academic staff at foundation universities, compared to 45.2% at public universities. This disparity suggests that foundation institutions may offer more flexible working conditions or greater leadership opportunities for women. Nonetheless, despite relative gains in lower academic roles, women continue to face substantial barriers in ascending to top leadership positions across both institutional types.

These statistics provide critical context for the present study's qualitative investigation of women's experiences in academic leadership. They reinforce the notion that structural and cultural barriers within Türkiye's higher education system disproportionately impact women's upward mobility—especially in public institutions, where hierarchical norms and traditional leadership expectations are more rigidly entrenched. The distribution of male and female academic staff across ranks and institution types is presented in the tables below:

Table 1. Academic Staff by Gender and Academic Rank

Academic Rank	Male	Female	Total	Female (%)
Professor	25,797	13,934	39,731	35.1%
Associate Professor	14,780	11,364	26,144	43.4%
Assistant Professor	24,074	22,015	46,089	47.7%
Lecturer	16,936	18,507	35,443	52.2%
Research Assistant	17,307	21,243	38,550	55.1%
Total	98,894	87,063	185,957	46.8%

Source: Council of Higher Education (YÖK), 2025a.

Table 2. Academic Staff by Gender and Institution Type

Institution Type	Male	Female	Total	Female (%)
Public Universities	84,432	69,518	153,950	45.2%
Foundation Universities*	14,462	17,545	32,007	54.8%
Total	98,894	87,063	185,957	46.8%

Source: Council of Higher Education (YÖK), 2025a.

*Includes Foundation Vocational Schools (MYO)

A closer look at academic staffing patterns within business schools in Türkiye reveals even starker gender disparities than the national average. As shown in Table 3 below, although women constitute 44.5% of all academic staff in business-related departments, their representation dramatically decreases at senior academic ranks.

While women hold the majority of research assistant (59.5%) and lecturer (52.8%) positions, they are significantly underrepresented in full professorships, accounting for only 28.3%. These patterns reinforce the structural inequalities that impede women's progression into leadership and higher academic status, particularly in male-dominated institutional cultures often prevalent in business schools.

This quantitative insight supports the study's broader argument: despite formal equality policies, deeply embedded cultural and structural barriers continue to shape gendered academic career trajectories, especially in high-prestige and leadership-oriented disciplines such as business administration.

Table 3. Gender Distribution of Academic Staff in Business Schools

Academic Rank	Male	Female	Total	Female (%)
Professor	531	210	741	28.3%
Associate Professor	340	200	540	37.0%
Assistant Professor	470	356	826	43.1%
Lecturer	368	412	780	52.8%
Research Assistant	291	428	719	59.5%
Total	2,000	1,606	3,606	44.5%

Source: Council of Higher Education (YÖK), 2025b.

Considering the data presented above, the decision to focus this study on business schools within public universities in Türkiye is both theoretically and empirically grounded. Business schools represent a unique academic domain where male-dominated leadership norms, high-status disciplines, and performance-based promotion systems are especially entrenched, amplifying the visibility of gendered career inequalities. Furthermore, as the national data show, public universities account for most of the academic employment and exhibit lower female representation in leadership positions compared to their foundation (private) counterparts. Excluding private institutions thus allows for a more focused investigation of the structural and cultural barriers present in state-funded, bureaucratic academic settings, where informal networks and rigid hierarchies are more prominent. This institutional context, combined with the symbolic power of business education in shaping broader societal leadership ideals, offers a strategically relevant and analytically rich site for exploring persistent gender inequities in academic leadership. Accordingly, the study's design is informed by both contextual specificity and theoretical alignment with Feminist Institutionalism and Poststructuralist Feminism.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

This study is grounded in an interpretivist research paradigm, which aligns with the aim of understanding how women experience, interpret, and make meaning of their leadership trajectories within academic institutions. Interpretivism supports qualitative inquiry by emphasizing subjective experience, contextual understanding, and the co-construction of knowledge between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2015).

To this end, the study adopts a qualitative research design to explore the structural and cultural barriers that women academics face in attaining leadership positions in Turkish universities. Specifically, a phenomenological approach is employed,

centering on the lived experiences, perceptions, and coping strategies of women in academic leadership roles. This approach facilitates a nuanced, in-depth understanding of both personal and institutional challenges.

Phenomenology was selected as the most appropriate methodological approach because the study seeks to uncover and interpret the subjective, lived experiences of women in academic leadership, rather than to examine an institution or group as a bounded case (Creswell, 2013). Unlike case study designs, which focus on context-bound systems, phenomenology is particularly suited to exploring how participants make meaning of shared experiences—such as gendered barriers in leadership—across varied institutional settings

4.2. Positionality and Reflexivity

This study acknowledges its positionality and reflexivity within a feminist framework. The sample consists of 20 women academics employed in public universities in Istanbul, a major metropolitan and relatively resource-rich setting. It is important to note that these participants may occupy relatively privileged positions compared to academics working in more peripheral, rural, or under-resourced regions of Türkiye. Factors such as geographic location, institutional prestige, and professional networks can confer varying degrees of empowerment and access to opportunities (Crenshaw, 2013; Collins, 2000).

From an intersectional feminist perspective, recognizing the diversity of experiences and power asymmetries among women themselves is crucial to avoid overgeneralization (Ahmed, 2012). The study's findings thus reflect the realities of women leaders within a specific urban and institutional context and may not capture the full spectrum of challenges faced by women academics across different socio-economic, regional, and institutional backgrounds in Türkiye. Future research should aim to include a broader range of voices to deepen understanding of how class, geography, and institutional status intersect with gender in shaping academic leadership trajectories (Crenshaw, 1989).

4.3. Sampling and Participants

The sample consists of 20 female academics occupying leadership positions at public universities in Istanbul, Türkiye. Participants are selected using purposive sampling, specifically the maximum variation technique, to capture a diverse range of experiences across same academic disciplines, institutions of varying sizes, and career stages.

Eligibility criteria for participants include:

- Holding a leadership position such as department head, dean, vice-dean, rector, vice-rector, or serving in institutional leadership roles such as faculty board member, committee chair, or similar positions.
- Employment at a public university.
- Possession of at least 10 years of academic experience.
- Willingness to voluntarily participate in the study.

Private universities were excluded from the sample in order to focus on state-regulated academic institutions where leadership structures, promotion systems, and organizational hierarchies are more standardized and centrally governed, allowing for a more consistent analysis of structural and cultural barriers across public settings.

Efforts are made to ensure a balanced representation across academic titles, including professors, associate professors, and assistant professors. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in the table below.

Table 4. Overview of Participants' Demographic and Institutional Attributes

Participant Code	Age Range	Academic Title	University Type	Leadership Position	Specialization Area	Academic Experience (Years)	Interview Duration (minutes)
P1	41–45	Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Finance	20	52
P2	46–50	Associate Professor	Public	Head of Department	Marketing	18	47
P3	36–40	Assistant Professor	Public	Committee Chair	Human Resources Management	12	55
P4	51–55	Professor	Public	Head of Department	Strategic Management	25	60
P5	46–50	Associate Professor	Public	Head of Department	Organizational Behavior	21	49
P6	31–35	Assistant Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Accounting	10	43
P7	41–45	Associate Professor	Public	Head of Department	International Business	15	51
P8	36–40	Assistant Professor	Public	Program Director	Entrepreneurship	11	46
P9	51–55	Professor	Public	Committee Chair	Finance	28	58
P10	41–45	Associate Professor	Public	Head of Department	Supply Chain Management	16	44
P11	46–50	Associate Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Management and Organization	19	43
P12	36–40	Assistant Professor	Public	Deputy Head of Department	Business Administration	13	38
P13	51–55	Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Marketing	27	33
P14	31–35	Assistant Professor	Public	Department Coordinator	Accounting and Finance	10	42
P15	41–45	Associate Professor	Public	Committee Chair	Strategic Management	15	40
P16	46–50	Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Human Resources Management	22	45
P17	36–40	Assistant Professor	Public	Committee Chair	Management Information Systems	12	37
P18	41–45	Associate Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Entrepreneurship	14	45
P19	51–55	Professor	Public	Faculty Board Member	Organizational Behavior	26	39
P20	46–50	Associate Professor	Public	Head of Department	Marketing	20	37

4.4. Data Collection Methods

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, a method particularly suited to capturing the nuanced and multifaceted experiences of women in academic leadership. The interviews were designed to explore participants' professional trajectories and the challenges they faced along the way, while allowing for flexibility and responsiveness to individual narratives.

The interview protocol included open-ended questions covering four major areas: career milestones and systemic barriers; institutional policies and informal practices; cultural perceptions of leadership; and experiences with mentorship and professional networks. These domains were selected to align with the study's theoretical framework and to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the structural and cultural dynamics shaping women's leadership experiences.

Interviews were conducted either face-to-face or via secure online platforms, based on participant preference and logistical convenience. Each session lasted approximately 45 minutes, and all interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent. To maintain both accuracy and cultural fidelity, interviews were conducted in Turkish, the participants' native language, and later translated into English for analysis and publication.

4.5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was chosen for this study due to its flexibility and suitability for capturing the richness and complexity of participants' lived experiences. As a method that is not tied to any specific theoretical framework, thematic analysis enables an inductive, data-driven approach while remaining compatible with the study's critical feminist perspectives. It allows for the systematic identification and interpretation of both explicit content and underlying meanings within qualitative data, making it particularly well-suited for exploring the multifaceted structural and cultural barriers faced by women in academic leadership. Moreover, its structured yet adaptable framework (Braun and Clarke, 2006) facilitates the organization of large, research material into coherent and meaningful themes, providing a clear pathway from raw data to analytical insight. This methodological choice aligns with the study's aim of amplifying marginalized voices and generating nuanced, actionable knowledge to inform institutional reforms.

Thematic analysis was conducted manually without the use of qualitative data analysis software. Instead, Microsoft Word and Excel were used for organizing, coding, and tracking the development of codes and themes. Thematic analysis was employed to systematically identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the qualitative data, following the six-phase framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This flexible yet rigorous method allows for an in-depth exploration of participants' lived experiences while ensuring transparency and methodological coherence.

Thematic analysis was conducted through a rigorous, multi-phase process to ensure a rich and valid interpretation of the interview data. Initially, all interviews were transcribed verbatim and repeatedly read by the researchers to facilitate deep familiarization and immersion. Early impressions and analytical notes were recorded to begin identifying patterns and potential meanings. Using an inductive coding approach, the data were systematically analyzed, with segments of text labeled based on emerging semantic and latent features of interest. These initial codes were then examined for relationships and overarching patterns, which were organized into preliminary themes reflecting key aspects of participants' experiences concerning gender and leadership in academia. The resulting themes underwent a two-step review process: first, ensuring internal coherence among coded extracts within each theme, and second, validating their relevance and consistency across the entire research material. Each theme was clearly defined and named to capture its central concept, enabling a coherent narrative to emerge. The final stage involved synthesizing the

findings into a structured report, incorporating direct quotes from participants to illustrate and support the analysis. Throughout, the process maintained a balance between honoring participants' voices and engaging critically with the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Institutionalism and Poststructuralist Feminism, resulting in analytically grounded and practically relevant insights into the structural and cultural barriers facing women in academic leadership. To enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the thematic analysis, a secondary coder with expertise in qualitative research was consulted during the coding process. An initial set of transcripts was independently coded and then compared to identify discrepancies. Through iterative discussion and consensus-building, agreement was reached on code definitions and theme boundaries, strengthening the consistency and analytical rigor of the final thematic structure (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The themes generated through this analytical process are presented in Figure 1.

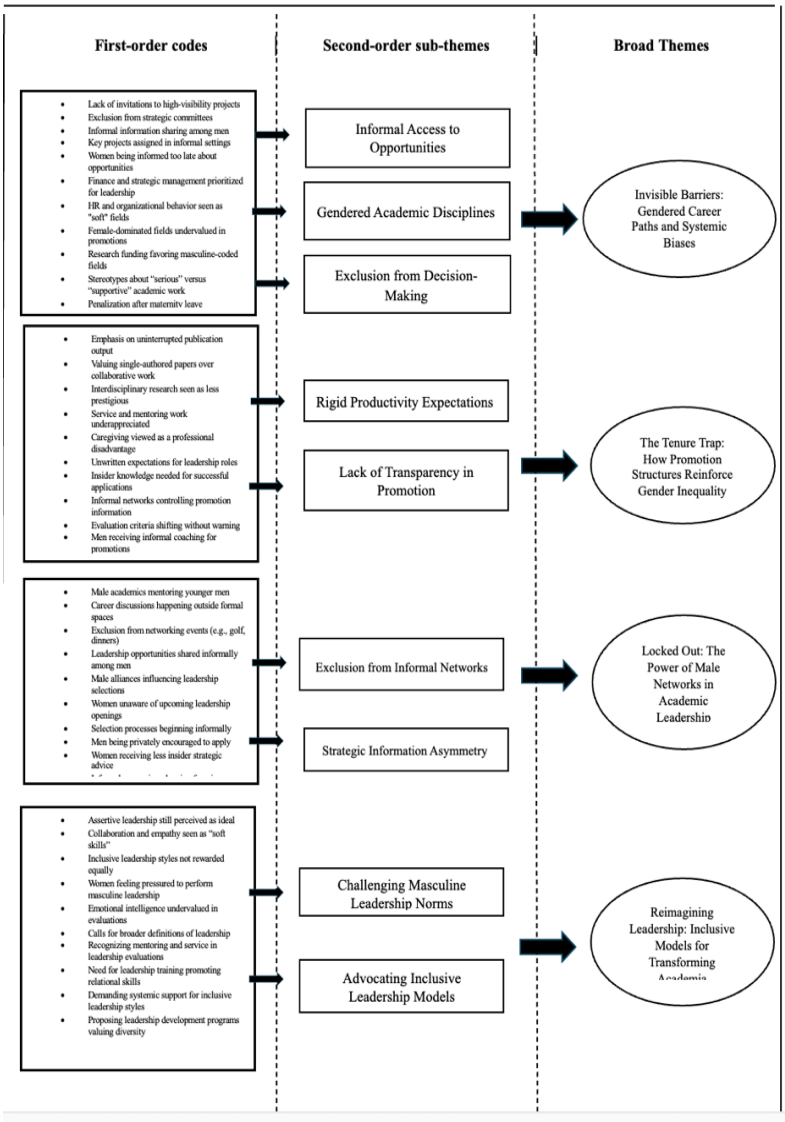

Figure 1. Key Themes Identified in the Leadership Experiences of Women Academics

5. Findings

The study identified four central themes: invisible barriers, reflecting how gendered career paths and implicit biases shape academic trajectories; the tenure trap, illustrating how promotion systems reinforce gender inequality; locked out, emphasizing the exclusionary power of male-dominated networks; and reimagining leadership, which underscores the need for inclusive, relational leadership models to transform academic culture. It is important to situate these findings within the specific context of participants' relatively privileged positionality—being women leaders based largely in Istanbul's public universities—which may shape their access to

resources and networks compared to peers in more peripheral or under-resourced settings. This contextualization informs a nuanced interpretation of the barriers described.

Theme 1: *Invisible Barriers: Gendered Career Paths and Systemic Biases*

This theme focuses on how institutional structures and disciplinary hierarchies shape gendered career trajectories within business academia. It is distinct from later themes by emphasizing systemic and structural conditions—not specific processes like promotion or social networks—that influence how women's careers unfold from the early to mid-stages, regardless of leadership aspirations.

Participants described a persistent pattern of occupational segregation within business schools. Certain subfields—such as finance and strategic management—were perceived as gateways to leadership, while others, such as human resources and organizational behavior, were seen as peripheral. These disciplinary divisions carried prestige differences, often aligning men with higher-status academic tracks. Participant 7 noted, "*In our department, if you're in finance, you're automatically assumed to be leadership material. If you're in HR, it's like you're a support act.*"

Several women noted that early in their doctoral studies, they observed subtle cues from advisors and faculty about which fields were more "serious" or "strategic." Participant 3 recalled, "*I was encouraged to switch from organizational behavior to finance—not because I liked finance more, but because I was told it would help me get ahead.*" Others reported being discouraged from pursuing research topics related to gender or social impact, which were framed as less rigorous or valuable. Participant 13 stated, "*I was told to avoid 'soft' topics if I wanted to be taken seriously."*

Institutional attitudes also subtly discouraged women from aiming for leadership early in their careers. Participant 14 shared, "*From the first year of my doctorate, I noticed that male students were being nudged toward competitive grant programs and leadership roles. I was told I might prefer something more 'balanced'*."

Structural factors such as workload allocation and research assignments further entrenched these divisions. Many participants highlighted that they were disproportionately tasked with coordination, logistics, or service-related roles within research projects and departmental operations. Participant 22 noted, "*When project teams are formed, I'm always given coordination tasks, not lead authorship or budgeting. These roles don't translate into promotion points.*" Participant 4 added, "*While male colleagues get involved in strategic planning, I'm asked to organize student events.*"

Participants also observed how visibility within the faculty was shaped by informal presentation norms and confidence expectations that often-disadvantaged women. Participant 10 explained, "*Speaking assertively in meetings is seen as a sign of leadership for men, but for us, it's often labeled as aggressive or inappropriate. That dynamic builds early in your career and shapes how people view you*."

Caregiving responsibilities were another recurring theme. These were described as structurally penalizing women's careers through rigid expectations of uninterrupted productivity. Although parental leave is legally protected, participants reported that using it—especially for extended, unpaid periods—triggered subtle but powerful forms of informal backlash. Participant 1 stated, "*Even though the university says we can take parental leave, you come back and feel like you've fallen off the track. No*

one waits for you." Participant 18 reflected, "*When I requested flexible teaching hours during my child's first year, I was reminded this could affect future opportunities*."

Others recounted how their absence became a topic of quiet judgment among colleagues, with subtle remarks or changed behavior upon return. Participant 9 shared, "*No one says it openly, but when you return, you're treated like someone who chose their family over the department. I was told, 'We weren't sure you'd still be interested in leadership roles.*'" Participant 5 added, "*Even though I had approval, I was excluded from project meetings while I was on leave. When I returned, it was clear decisions had already been made—without me.*"

Building on these early-career and systemic barriers, the next theme explores how formal promotion and tenure processes within Turkish public universities further reinforce gender inequalities. While the previous theme focused on structural conditions shaping career trajectories, this section examines how evaluation criteria and institutional practices act as gatekeepers to senior academic positions, often disadvantaging women.

Theme 2: *The Tenure Trap: How Promotion Structures Reinforce Gender Inequality*

This theme explores how promotion and tenure systems, particularly within Turkish public universities, reinforce structural gender inequality. Unlike the previous theme, which focuses on long-term career shaping, this theme centers on formal academic evaluation processes—especially those tied to associate and full professorship—and how these disproportionately disadvantage women.

Participants highlighted that promotion processes are largely shaped by rigid, metric-based evaluation models. These models often prioritize high-volume publishing in journals indexed in international databases such as SSCI, SCOPUS, or TR Dizin. Participant 2 explained, "*Even if your research has real-world relevance, if it's not in an SSCI journal, it doesn't count for promotion. That kind of publication culture leaves out a lot of valuable work."*

Another recurring observation was the devaluation of collaborative, interdisciplinary, or local research, which women disproportionately produce. Many female academics felt that their contributions to team projects, especially on gender or community-related topics, were treated as secondary to individual achievement. One participant stated, "*In our faculty, writing a solo finance paper gets more attention than a co-authored article on women's entrepreneurship—even if the latter gets more citations*."

Participants also noted that promotion committee members were typically senior male faculty who were part of entrenched academic circles. These circles shaped unspoken norms about which fields and research types are more 'respectable.' Participant 5 said, "*The committee that reviewed my associate professorship application seemed more interested in whether I fit their academic profile than my actual outputs.*"

A significant number of women stated that their teaching and service contributions, although essential for departmental operations, were undervalued in comparison to research outputs. Participant 6 noted, "*I coordinate the internship program and mentor dozens of students every year, but none of that counts during evaluation."*

Women also reported confusion and lack of transparency regarding promotion expectations. Several mentioned that requirements were inconsistently applied or not clearly communicated. Participant 12 reflected, "*I had to figure it out by watching*

who got promoted and trying to reverse-engineer the process. It's not written anywhere."

In the Turkish public university context, these rigid expectations are further exacerbated by centralized regulations from YÖK (the Council of Higher Education), which apply standardized metrics without adequately accounting for caregiving responsibilities or interdisciplinary work. As such, these promotion mechanisms operate as gatekeeping tools, reinforcing who is seen as competent and promotable within a deeply masculinized academic culture. Participant 19 summarized this sentiment: "*You can be an excellent teacher, a mentor, a collaborator—but if you don't publish solo papers in journals, you don't move up*."

The promotion systems described above operate within broader institutional cultures where informal male-dominated networks wield considerable influence. The next theme delves into how these networks function as gatekeepers, shaping women's access to leadership beyond formal evaluation processes.

Theme 3: *Locked Out: The Power of Male Networks in Academic Leadership*

This theme explores how informal male-dominated networks in Turkish public universities continue to act as powerful gatekeepers to leadership roles in Participants described a persistent pattern of occupational segregation within business schools. Distinct from prior themes, this theme specifically focuses on relational and cultural dimensions—how mentorship, sponsorship, and informal relationships affect women's access to leadership—not formal promotion systems.

Participants repeatedly described being excluded from informal academic spaces where key decisions were made—departmental nominations, project assignments, or institutional appointments. Participant 8 stated, "*There's a faculty WhatsApp group where male professors share internal calls for appointments and projects. I only find out through the grapevine, long after the opportunity is gone*."

Several participants emphasized that visibility in these networks had little to do with merit, but rather with interpersonal alignment and long-standing male solidarity. Participant 16 shared, "*The dean picks people he has known for years—old friends or former male classmates. It has nothing to do with your CV or credentials."*

Women also described being overlooked in public settings and advisory roles where institutional influence is concentrated. Participant 11 said, "*Whenever there's a board formed to revise the curriculum or consult on strategic plans, it's the same male names—regardless of their expertise. Women are rarely invited unless it's about student affairs or event planning.*"

Mentorship emerged as another area of significant disparity. While male academics had long-standing ties to senior mentors who opened doors for them, women found few structured opportunities for support. Participant 19 noted, "*There's no senior woman in my department who's been in leadership. I don't even know who to ask for guidance.*" Participant 6 added, "*I'm the first female professor in my department. There's no path to follow*."

Participants expressed that their exclusion extended to research collaborations and conference panels. Participant 10 observed, "*You see the same male professors inviting each other to join panels, publications, and projects. Unless you break into that circle, you're invisible.*"

Some participants described forming small, grassroots networks with other women to share knowledge and support one another. However, these efforts lacked the institutional support, resources, and legitimacy that male alliances naturally possessed. As one associate professor said, "*We created our own mentoring group, but it's seen as just a 'women's thing,' not something strategic or institutional."*

Participants strongly advocated for formalized and transparent mentorship systems, inclusive networking platforms, and institutional recognition of diverse forms of social capital. Participant 14 emphasized, "*We need systems where sponsorship isn't informal and dependent on friendships, but structured and accountable.*" Without actively dismantling these informal hierarchies, any formal policy on gender equality risks being symbolic and ineffective.

Building on the challenges posed by exclusion from informal networks, the final theme examines how deeply ingrained masculine-coded ideals shape definitions and practices of leadership within Turkish public universities. It highlights the urgent need to reimagine leadership models to be more inclusive, relational, and responsive to diverse experiences.

Theme 4: *Reimagining Leadership: Inclusive Models for Transforming Academia*

This theme explores how academic leadership in Turkish public universities remains tightly linked to masculine-coded ideals such as competitiveness, assertiveness, and dominance. Unlike previous themes that address access to career and promotion systems, this theme focuses on how leadership itself is defined, enacted, and legitimized in ways that systematically marginalize inclusive styles of governance.

Participants expressed that institutional cultures continue to view leadership through hierarchical and transactional lenses, discouraging alternative styles based on collaboration, care, and shared decision-making. Participant 3 noted, "*When the rector speaks, it's top-down. There's no discussion, just implementation. That model gets reproduced at every level, from faculty councils to research committees*."

Many women leaders described that when they attempted to adopt inclusive or consensus-based leadership models, their approaches were either dismissed or reframed when echoed by male colleagues. Participant 7 shared, "*When I proposed a mentorship-based leadership model for junior faculty, it was dismissed as impractical. But when a male colleague pitched something similar six months later—framed as 'strategic onboarding'—it was funded immediately.*"

The association of effective leadership with masculine charisma, seniority, and public assertiveness was another recurring theme. Participant 15 observed, "*There's an unspoken image of a leader: someone who wears a dark suit, speaks loudly, doesn't hesitate. If you speak calmly or ask for input, you're seen as unsure.*"

Several participants indicated that performing leadership as a woman requires balancing visibility with caution. Participant 4 explained, "*You have to be firm, but not too firm. You have to be warm, but not too soft. It's a constant negotiation between being accepted and being taken seriously."*

Women also expressed that their leadership styles were often essentialized or dismissed as emotional. Participant 18 noted, "*When I show empathy in meetings, I'm told I'm being overly sentimental. But when male colleagues lose their temper, it's seen as passion."*

Participants emphasized that women who do reach leadership positions are often viewed as exceptional or token representatives. Participant 20 explained, "*I was told I was promoted because I was 'not like other women'—as if being a woman leader had to come with a qualifier.*"

Despite these challenges, several participants described attempts to disrupt these norms. Participant 11 remarked, "*We created a shared leadership model in our department. It took time, but now decisions are more transparent, and people feel responsible, not just obedient.*"

Participants suggested institutional transformation must go beyond surface-level gender parity to include the redefinition of leadership itself. This includes expanding leadership development to include emotional intelligence, mentorship competencies, and equity-based decision-making. Participant 13 concluded, "*We don't need heroic leaders. We need distributed leadership, where knowledge and responsibility are shared.*"

6. Discussion

This study set out to explore the structural and cultural barriers that hinder women academics' advancement to leadership positions within Turkish universities, with a particular focus on business schools. Using the theoretical frameworks of Feminist Institutionalism and Poststructuralist Feminism, the study sought not only to identify the visible and invisible obstacles faced by women but also to critically analyze the institutional and cultural logics that reproduce gendered hierarchies.

These findings align closely with existing literature on leadership and gender inequality in Türkiye, corroborating patterns of occupational segregation, biased promotion criteria, and exclusion from informal male-dominated networks documented in prior studies (Özkanlı, Ö. and White, K., 2008; Titrek, O. et al., 2014; Cobanoglu, F. 2018). However, this study advances the scholarship by integrating feminist institutional and poststructuralist perspectives to provide a nuanced understanding of how formal policies and cultural norms interact to sustain gender disparities.

The findings structured around four major themes—Invisible Barriers, The Tenure Trap, Locked Out, and Reimagining Leadership—offer significant theoretical and practical contributions. This section discusses the implications of these findings, highlighting how they extend existing scholarship and offering recommendations for institutional reforms.

One of the key theoretical contributions of this study lies in empirically demonstrating how the interplay between formal institutional structures and informal cultural norms sustains gender inequality in academic leadership. Building on Feminist Institutionalism, the findings reveal that even when formal policies promote gender equality, informal networks, biased evaluation criteria, and cultural assumptions continue to privilege male academics and masculine models of leadership (Waylen, 2014; Mackay et al., 2010).

This study also extends Poststructuralist Feminist analysis by showing how leadership, merit, and excellence are discursively constructed within academic institutions. Participants' narratives illustrate how the symbolic valorization of competitiveness, assertiveness, and independence marginalizes collaborative, empathetic, and community-oriented leadership styles, traditionally associated with

femininity. Thus, the findings demonstrate how institutional discourses naturalize and perpetuate gendered power structures, even in contexts where overt discrimination has declined.

Moreover, by focusing specifically on the Turkish academic context, this study enriches feminist institutional analysis with non-Western empirical data, illustrating how global patterns of gender inequality intersect with local cultural norms, such as traditional gender role expectations and patriarchal values embedded within higher education institutions.

In practical terms, the study provides actionable insights for universities seeking to foster gender equity in leadership. First, the findings highlight the urgent need to redefine leadership criteria to recognize and reward diverse leadership styles, moving beyond the narrow valorization of masculine-coded traits. Leadership development programs must incorporate training on inclusive leadership models, emphasizing relational, collaborative, and community-centered approaches.

Second, the study underscores the importance of formalizing mentorship and sponsorship structures to counteract the exclusionary effects of male-dominated informal networks. By creating transparent, structured pathways for leadership development, institutions can actively dismantle hidden barriers to women's advancement.

Third, the findings suggest that institutions must not only revise formal policies but also engage in cultural transformation efforts. This includes critically interrogating the narratives and discourses that frame leadership potential, success, and academic excellence in ways that systematically marginalize women and other underrepresented groups.

Finally, the study calls attention to the necessity of integrating intersectional perspectives into gender equity initiatives, recognizing that race, class, and other dimensions of identity intersect with gender to shape diverse experiences of exclusion and empowerment in academia.

The findings of this study underscore that reducing the gender gap in academic leadership requires a dual approach, integrating both structural reforms and cultural transformations. As participants highlighted, structural interventions alone—such as flexible work policies or transparent promotion systems—are insufficient if cultural narratives around leadership, excellence, and professional commitment remain unchallenged.

Structural reforms must focus on establishing transparent, equitable, and inclusive institutional processes. As seen in international examples like the NSF ADVANCE program in the United States and the Athena SWAN Charter in the United Kingdom, interventions such as formal mentorship programs, flexible tenure clocks, and explicit recognition of collaborative and interdisciplinary work can mitigate systemic biases (Casad et al., 2020; Bencivenga and Drew, 2021).

However, cultural reforms are equally crucial. Traditional academic success metrics—such as uninterrupted publication records, sole-authored research, and linear career trajectories—tend to privilege male academics and marginalize women, particularly those balancing caregiving responsibilities. Cultural narratives that equate leadership with assertiveness, independence, and competitiveness must be critically redefined to value collaboration, emotional intelligence, participatory decision-

making, and collective achievement (Chappell, 2014). Through the lens of Poststructuralist Feminism, this study highlights how institutional discourses shape perceptions of legitimate leadership. As Butler (1990) and Scott (2007) argue, achieving gender equity requires redefining the symbolic meanings attached to leadership and excellence—not just policy change.

Sustainable progress depends on aligning structural reforms with cultural transformation. Institutions must go beyond flexible work policies and tenure reforms to actively promote diverse leadership styles, challenge implicit biases, and revise success metrics. Examples from MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) and the CWIMS (Committee on the Women in the Mathematical Sciences) initiative show that combining policy reform with cultural engagement leads to measurable progress (Bailyn, 2003). Feminist Institutionalism calls for restructuring systems like promotion and work-life policies, while Poststructuralist Feminism urges a shift in leadership discourses. Without both strategies, reforms risk being symbolic. As Igiebor (2025) notes, cultural resistance can undermine policy. For lasting change, institutions should:

- Embed equity in missions and leadership development,
- Value diverse academic contributions,
- Ensure inclusive decision-making,
- Publicly celebrate collaborative leadership.

Such holistic approaches not only support women's advancement but also enhance institutional resilience and relevance in a diverse academic landscape.

7. Conclusion

This study examined how structural and cultural barriers intersect to hinder women's advancement into academic leadership within Turkish universities. Participants described a persistent pattern of occupational segregation within business schools. Using Feminist Institutionalism and Poststructuralist Feminism, the study revealed how formal rules and informal norms reinforce gendered hierarchies in settings that are ostensibly meritocratic.

The findings demonstrate that achieving true gender equity requires more than formal policies; it demands a profound cultural transformation that redefines traditional notions of merit and leadership. While mentorship, transparent promotion processes, and flexibility are essential components, they alone are insufficient without actively challenging the masculine-coded ideals of leadership that dominate academia.

This study contributes empirical insights from a non-Western context and offers practical strategies for institutional change. Advancing equity in academia necessitates combining structural reforms with cultural shifts that transform the underlying systems sustaining gender inequality.

Key Recommendations:

- Promote inclusive leadership models that value empathy and collaboration.
- Conduct climate surveys to identify and address exclusionary norms.
- Integrate intersectional frameworks within equity initiatives to account for diverse experiences.

- Highlight and celebrate diverse forms of leadership to broaden accepted norms.

8. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights into gendered barriers in academic leadership, several limitations must be noted. The small, Istanbul-based sample limits generalizability, and focusing only on women currently in leadership excludes voices of those who left or were excluded. Self-reported data may introduce bias, and although intersectional factors were acknowledged, gender remained the central focus. Finally, the analysis reflects the researcher's positionality within feminist frameworks. Despite these constraints, the study offers a solid foundation for further research on gender equity in academia.

Future research should deepen intersectional analyses, including factors such as race and disability, to better understand the complexity of experiences in academic leadership. Long-term evaluations of equity interventions would provide critical evidence of effectiveness. Exploring the role of male allyship and institutional responsibility in promoting gender equity remains an important avenue.

Additionally, comparative studies between Istanbul-based and non-Istanbul universities, and between public and private institutions, could illuminate contextual differences influencing gender dynamics.

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